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"Dare I Ask?": Eliciting Prior Knowledge and Its Implications for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

This article examines high school teachers' engagement of newcomer English learner students' prior knowledge. Three central research questions guided this study: 1) To what extent do teachers function as mediators of their students' prior knowledge? 2) What goes into teachers' thinking about how and when to elicit prior knowledge? and 3) How do students respond to teachers' engagement of their prior knowledge? Data are analyzed through sociocultural perspectives on teaching, learning and identity (Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978) and suggest that eliciting prior knowledge, particularly among vulnerable student populations, is an ethical enterprise involving risk and an ability to anticipate unexpected consequences. Implications for research and pedagogical practice are presented.

Introduction

Referring to her low-level newcomer refugee and immigrant high school English as a Second Language (ESL) students, Ms. Jones (pseudonyms are used throughout this article), a high school ESL teacher related,

Sometimes I'm afraid to ask too many questions about their lives and their families...Some of these kids have come from war, or have left someone close to them at home. Even though I want to know more about them, I don't want to upset them. I'm also just not sure I want to know too much, you know? Like, 'leave good enough alone'...

Scholarship on language and literacy education has long emphasized constructivist perspectives on learning, including tapping into students' prior knowledge, background and related experiences as a means of scaffolding learning (Lantolf, 2000, 2006; Moll, González, Amanti & Neff, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Research has also stressed the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in diverse classrooms (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1992), and in language teaching in particular (Huber-Warring & Warring, 2006; Grant & Wong, 2003; Nieto, 2002). Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. However, like Ms. Jones, teachers of racially, socio-economically, or linguistically

marginalized immigrant youth are sometimes reluctant to inquire into the prior experiences of their students for fear of triggering memories of traumatic life events, or homesickness, or of creating mistrust in students who are unaccustomed to being asked by teachers or other adults about their personal histories and home life (McBrien, 2005). Indeed, many refugee and immigrants have learned to be mistrustful of authority figures, and that disclosing personal information can be detrimental to their own or family members' well-being. On the other hand, students' reluctance to detail their experiences may lead teachers hold deficit perspectives on their students' knowledge. In other cases, teachers can make incorrect assumptions about the kinds of knowledge students possess, and pose questions about which students have little or no background knowledge (e.g., vacation destinations, holidays, or sports teams) (Kubota, 2004). Either can result in students' disengagement with learning, particularly when they feel unacknowledged in the classroom.

This article focuses on classroom discourse between high school teachers and immigrant students with interrupted formal education (SIFE). SIFE students are among the fastest growing population of English learners in the U.S. (Short & Boyson, 2012). SIFE students who enter the U.S. educational system in later grades often face particular challenges in navigating content area-specific language, particularly those who are developing literacy (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Because of their limited prior formal schooling and emerging reading and writing skills, a common assumption is that SIFE students cannot engage in higher-level thinking (Grant & Wong, 2003). As a result, the social and academic needs of these students are often considered secondary to higher-performing students, or to students whose needs and dispositions can be more tangibly addressed (Dávila, 2012). Several studies have illustrated how such deficit thinking among teachers of linguistic and cultural minority students is detrimental to student identities and achievement in school (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Lee, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999).

Data presented in this paper illustrate the extent to which teachers engaged, or sometimes intentionally avoided engaging SIFE students' prior experiences as a means of fostering literacy and oral proficiency in academic content areas. In this study, I focus on prior knowledge as a formulation of one's habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) as well as experiences that inform one's identity and understanding of the world. Three central research questions guided this study: 1) To what extent do teachers function as mediators of their students' prior knowledge?; 2) How do they determine if, when and how to elicit prior knowledge?, and 3) How do students respond to teachers' attempts to engage their prior knowledge? Analyses center on the various discourses and pedagogical practices that shaped students' learning, and the resources students drew from in response to these practices. I stress the importance of teaching for linguistic and conceptual understanding, but also argue that young adult SIFE students should be given tools, resources and space to leverage their skills, experiences, goals and identities.

Background

Prior Knowledge and Learning

This study's research design is grounded in sociocultural perspectives on learning and identity. Sociocultural frameworks regard learning as a social process, and hold that culture provides tools and resources to mediate thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). In the last several decades scholars within the fields of second and foreign language education have highlighted the value of sociocultural constructivist pedagogical approaches to developing language proficiency (Bruner, 1978; Donato, 1994; Gibbons, 2002; Lantolf, 2000, 2006). These approaches include eliciting students' prior knowledge through questioning and through culturally relevant texts, modeling, coaching, and providing feedback, as well as student-centered metacognitive approaches, including self-reflection and self-monitoring. The role of the teacher within this framework is to provide scaffolding and instructional support in order to promote higher-order thinking and learning.

Although empirical studies have shown that constructivist approaches to the teaching of language and content promote student learning, the majority of existing scholarship has focused students in at the elementary school level. For instance, Au (1998) found that Native Hawaiian elementary school students' performance on reading tasks improved when they were given culturally responsive texts that tapped into their backgrounds and learning styles. Additional research has shown that activities that activate prior knowledge improve young English learners' comprehension of new material (Carrell, 1983; Moll, 2005). While much can be drawn from these studies to inform understandings of secondary school English learners, there is need for greater attention to the classroom learning experiences adolescents and young adults (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Learner Identities

Sociocultural perspectives hold that language learning is mediated through prior experience, physical and social contexts, and dynamics of interpersonal communication that are inevitably influenced by factors such as race, social class, gender, and immigration status. This research examines language proficiency as not just a skill, but also as a socially and culturally mediated practice tied to learners' identities and agency (Blommaert, 2010; Harklau, 2007; Norton, 2000).

The notion of cultural capital, as the knowledge and skills exemplified through upbringing and educational qualification (Bourdieu, 1991), is salient to an examination of student engagement in school. Moll, Amanti, Neff and González (2005) have argued that in order to validate immigrant learners' multiple identities, pedagogies must be linked to funds of knowledge, which are historically accumulated, developed bodies of knowledge essential to well-being. Scholarship has shown that schools often undervalue immigrant students' cultural capital (Valenzuela, 1999; Lee, 2005).

Norton (2000) posits that "It is only by understanding the histories and lived experiences of language learners that the language teacher can create conditions that will facilitate social interaction in the classroom and in the wider community, and help learners claim the right to speak" (p. 142). However, Kubota (2007) has warned against essentializing, or stereotyping members of ethnic groups, and instead calls on teachers to be critically aware of the descriptive nature of culture, diversity within culture, the dynamic nature of culture,

and discursive constructions of culture. Canagarajah (1999) argues that learning English in any context involves learning new identities and discourses, which can be a liberating, but painful process. Ibrahim (1999) has, likewise, argued that identity is inseparable from the content and mode of learning, and that pedagogies that fail to address, engage, and invest in the identities of ESL learners do more harm than good. He advocated the use of hip-hop as an identity-affirming and legitimizing pedagogical tool within English language classrooms, particularly in classrooms with African-origin students. In his view, hip-hop music offers sites of critique and allows ELLs to “enact multiple ways of speaking, being and knowing” (p. 367).

Ladson-Billings (1992) explains that culturally responsive teachers develop intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by “using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 382). Culturally responsive teachers realize not only the importance of academic achievement, but also the maintenance of cultural identity and heritage (Gay, 2010). Drawing on this body of literature, I critically examine what happened in secondary classrooms where SIFE students’ prior knowledge and cultural capital were or were not engaged, and the kinds of learning that took place as a result.

Methods

This study took place at a high school located in a large metropolitan region in the U.S. southeast. Over two thousand students attended the school during the period of this study. The majority of the students enrolled at the school were socioeconomically middle, upper middle and upper class and lived in the neighborhoods surrounding the school. District zoning policies, however, had in recent years diversified the school’s student demographics leading to a 33% increase in its enrollment of low-wealth immigrant and racial minority students. The school was designated as a SIFE Center in 2008, which resulted in the majority of SIFE students in the district being placed there.

Secondary SIFE students at the high school where the research took place were initially placed in beginning (Level 1) English as a Second Language (ESL) courses upon their enrollment in school. Aside from ESL, they enrolled in mainstream content area coursework required for graduation (e.g., algebra, earth science, biology, American history), as well as elective courses that fit their schedules, such as art and physical education. The majority of their classmates in these courses were native English speakers and non-SIFE English learners.

Participants

Data presented in this article were collected through observations in Level 1 ESL, civics, and art classes in which twelve SIFE students were enrolled. The twelve students were from Mexico, Honduras (2), the Congo, Somalia, Nepal, China, Pakistan and Vietnam (4) and all were also one or more years older than their grade-level peers. They had been at the school between five months and two years.

Three teachers were involved in the study: Ms. Jones, Mr. Wilson, and Mrs. Edwards. Ms. Jones, the ESL classroom teacher, held a Masters degree in Teaching ESL and had twenty years of experience teaching ESL. She had no experience with SIFE ELLs prior to teaching this class. She had been at the school for five years at the time of this study. Mr. Wilson was a social studies teacher who had taught for 19 years, and he had English learners in his

classes for roughly seven years. He had attended workshops on teaching English learners using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) method (Echevarría, Vogt & Short, 2012). Mrs. Edwards had taught art for nearly six years. She had no formal training in teaching English learners, though she had had ESL students in her art classes throughout her six years of teaching.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data presented in this article were gathered through classroom observations in the ESL, civics and art classrooms in which SIFE students were enrolled, as well as interviews with Ms. Jones, Mrs. Edwards, and Mr. Wilson. I choose to highlight these classes in this article because they illustrate differing patterns of engagement or avoidance of students' prior knowledge and experiences. Thus, as a purposeful example, it can be assumed that these patterns of engagement did not occur in all classrooms at the school.

As a participant-observer, I was a constant fixture within Ms. Jones's ninety-minute low-level ESL class two to three times per week over the course of one academic year. I observed the art class for two ninety-minute periods, and the social studies classroom for a total of five 90-minute periods. Observations centered on student participation based on teacher engagement of their backgrounds. I conducted structured and unstructured interviews with Ms. Jones, Mrs. Edwards, and Mr. Wilson that focused on their approaches to eliciting students' background knowledge. These interviews were conducted both independent of and after my classroom observations. Post-observation interviews allowed me to gather the teachers' perspectives on specific discursive exchanges that took place during the class period, as well as their rationale behind certain pedagogic choices. Where possible, I also interviewed students about their levels of comprehension of content presented to them in these three classes. Interviews with the teachers most often took place during their planning periods. More than 100 hours were spent in the classrooms, which generated field data from observations and eleven interviews.

Data analysis occurred in several stages. Following methods outlined by Patton (2002) and Heath and Street (2008), upon transcription of interviews, I read through the data and generated codes from interview responses, background literature, and the conceptual framework. Three central themes emerged from this coding process: direct engagement, conscientious avoidance of, and missed opportunities to engage students' background knowledge. Subthemes included teachers' enactment of culturally relevant pedagogy, pedagogy devoid of cultural relevancy, and student responses to the teachers' approaches. Using a constant comparative, or recursive perspective, data from observations and interviews were juxtaposed with my underlying assumptions or hunches, as well as theories and concepts from the literature in order to create a dialogue between existing explanations and ongoing data collection and analysis (Heath & Street, 2008).

As with any research, results of this research reflect my own background and experiences (I am White, European-American, child of an immigrant and a first-generation immigrant, former high school language teacher, and now a teacher educator and an educational researcher focusing on language learning and identity among immigrant and refugee students.) As a scholar of education, I bring an equity mindset to my teaching and research, with a mind towards helping my teacher candidates understand the role of experience and

culture in shaping their students' motivations in school and their positionality as teachers. The findings presented below are reflected through this lens.

Findings and Discussion

My analysis of classroom events are organized according to a) my observations of the extent to which teachers functioned as mediators of their students' prior knowledge; and b) students' responses to teachers engagement of their prior knowledge. Analyses of interview transcripts and observational field notes representative of typical events are discussed in relation to the research questions. I begin by presenting data that capture classroom contexts where engagement of prior knowledge did not occur, and then contexts were such engagement did occur. I then consider factors that facilitated or constrained engagement of prior knowledge.

"It's Better Not to Ask"

From observational field notes and interview transcript data, patterns of avoidance emerged in teachers' pedagogical practices that, perhaps unintentionally did not activate and engage students' prior knowledge. Although avoidance was evident in several ESL class periods I observed, I present one example recorded early on in my research in Ms. Jones's ESL 1 class. There were eight students in the class. The four male students were from Vietnam (3) and Pakistan (1); the four female students were from Vietnam (2), Nepal (1), and Mexico (1). Ms. Jones asked seven of the students to read independently, while she recited a book about the four food groups with one of the students to practice pronunciation. After ten minutes of silent reading, Ms. Jones placed laminated pictures of foods (fruits, bread, milk, chicken, etc.) on the large table they all shared and asked students to sort the pictures into foods that are typically eaten for breakfast, lunch and dinner. She then asked students to sort the foods by food groups. Students remained in their seats, and one student from Pakistan put his head down, and said, "This is boring." The three Vietnamese male students talked to one another in their native language (Bnhar) over Ms. Jones, who tried to maintain their attention.

Ms. Jones's teaching emphasized grammar and vocabulary, which though important, did not activate students' interest. In an interview after the class, I asked whether or not she generally attempted to connect vocabulary to students' home lives. She explained:

The students get free breakfast and lunch here (at the school) so I try to focus on things I know they get here. I once asked a student in front of the class what she eats at home, and she said "nothing" and other students started laughing. I felt really bad...so from then on, I've tried to avoid these kinds of questions.

Another example of this distancing was apparent when Mrs. Edwards, an art teacher, came to Ms. Jones's ESL class to give a lesson on the Thanksgiving holiday. As she began the class, Mrs. Edwards asked, "What is Thanksgiving?" When no one answered, she asked, "What are you thankful for?" There was still no response from the students, who watched her at the front of the classroom. Mrs. Edwards continued, relating how she and her family traditionally celebrate Thanksgiving by watching American football, and sitting down to an elaborate turkey dinner. After roughly 30 seconds. Mrs. Edwards began passing out white pieces of paper to each student. She then asked students to trace their hands on a piece of paper, which she told them would represent a turkey. She held up a model of a finished

product so that students could grasp the goal of the activity. When students were finished with this, she brought out old magazines and asked students to use magazine clippings to illustrate what were are thankful for. Students cut out pictures of cars, food, clothing and electronic devices which they glued to their turkeys.

In this lesson, Mrs. Edwards emphasized her American heritage and did not attempt to connect the content to traditions in the students' cultures. Although students seemed to enjoy working on artwork as evidenced by their pouring over magazines and their laughter over comparisons of their selections, several students did not grasp the broader significance of the content when I asked them after the class period had ended. In a post observation interview, Mrs. Edwards reflected on her teaching strategy:

I wanted to teach [them] about something that's really American, something they probably don't have in their countries... I guess I could have asked them if they do something like Thanksgiving at home...but it would take too long to go from person to person. And they're so quiet that I feel like I just need to fill the space with my talk...

In another class period, Mrs. Edwards began the class by writing the word "courage" on the white board and asked students if they know what it means. She explained first using abstract constructs, like "perseverance," and "risk." She then explained the term using examples: "It's when you try to do something you are afraid to do. Like singing in front of a group of people." She then escorted the students a photo lab down the hall where ten American students in Mrs. Edwards's advanced photography class were gathered around a large table with photos they had taken in front of them. Each photo was representative the students' notions of courage. The SIFE students were asked to walk around the table to look at and evaluate the photos. Then each of the photographers took turns explaining their photos. Some examples included:

1. A picture of young boys with physical disabilities from Mexico. (The photographer's mother worked as a volunteer physical therapist with these children during a mission trip.)
2. A picture of a mother who was also CEO of Wells Fargo, and who was a neighbor and friend of the photographer's mother.
3. A picture of a student holding up a letter with an offer of admission to an Ivy League university.
4. A self-portrait, which the photographer explained as having "the courage to be myself."
5. Pictures of student athletes.

The American and SIFE students did not verbally interact with one another except when SIFE students were asked by the American students to have their pictures taken as part of this project. The pictures were meant to symbolize their courage in coming to the U.S. Several of the students were afraid to have their pictures taken and looked bashfully into the camera, while others embraced the opportunity and assumed various poses in front of the camera. At no point were the newcomer students asked to give their own representations of "courage." The lack of meaningful interaction between SIFE students mirrored Mrs. Edwards' failure to engage the students' prior knowledge.

Incorporating Prior Knowledge

Though SIFE students may have limited academic skills, they often have experienced situations on which to build literacy (Mace-Matluck, Alexander-Kasparik & Queen, 1999). It is necessary for teachers to emphasize that what every student is learning should be related to and extend upon students' prior knowledge. An in-class activity observed in Mr. Wilson's civics class illustrates an approach to bridging students' backgrounds with new content material.

The class consisted of six SIFE students and twelve long-term English learners. Mr. Wilson placed students in groups of three or four for an assignment in which students read and interpreted articles of the United States Constitution. Students were mostly grouped by their native languages (Spanish, Russian, Lingala/French, and Chinese). Students helped one another with reading and analyzing the text, and with written reflections of the amendments' application to their lives. Students then made posters illustrating their interpretations, which they shared with the class. The following day, the teacher led a whole group discussion about similarities and differences between governments in the U.S. and in students' home countries. In some cases, students translated for one another. The following excerpt illustrates one of the many occasions during which students were asked for their own interpretations of new content in light of their backgrounds and experiences:

Mr. Wilson: The Second Amendment guarantees the right to bear arms. What does this mean?

Jérôme: You can have guns.

Mr. Wilson: Yes, it guarantees a person's right to own a gun. Does this mean that anyone can own a gun and bring it anywhere?

Maria: No, you need to have a license. And some places don't let you have guns

Mr. Wilson: Right. Does this right exist in all countries?

Maria: Well in Mexico I think there is a law, but there is a lot of shooting anyway where I come from.

Mr. Wilson asked students to continue comparing laws in the U.S. and their home countries in groups of three. As an on-going assignment, students were asked to come up with their own laws around issues of importance to them. This activity highlights the importance of teaching strategies that align with the cognitive ability and age of students, as opposed to their language proficiency.

After class I asked the two students from China how much of the lesson they were able to comprehend. One of the students, Stella, responded, "We did study politics in China, but it was very different. There's so much information, so I take notes and translate later, which means I don't always understand right away when Mr. Wilson talks. Laws are different in China, but Mr. Wilson knows a little about Chinese culture...this is good." In spite of their struggles with the pace of instruction, Mr. Wilson's display of interest in China has contributed to these students' feeling welcomed within the classroom.

Mr. Wilson made a point of eliciting and integrating students' background knowledge within his classroom as a means of building community. He explained:

Last year I had three or four Vietnamese students who shared their experiences openly. One (Tim) had an uncle who had been imprisoned and the whole class opened up

because his uncle was killed in prison for protesting against the government...So then it was very easy for the whole class to open up because I could always go back to Tim's experience. It's a safety and trust issue... and different personalities. I have a student who must have had a bad experience because she is rigid around me. So I just stopped asking her questions. And I have another student who I just learned got married over the weekend...but I won't go near that one...I don't want to embarrass her... I'm not sure she'll stay in school much longer.

Mr. Wilson was cognizant of barriers to getting to know his students. In this case, gender differences contributed to his reluctance to probe too deeply into the home life of a female student.

During my research, Ms. Jones involved her ESL students in a photographic essay project with ESL classes from other schools. Students presented their work at local art gallery. When I went to the exhibit's opening night ceremony, none of the students' parents were in attendance, and most in attendance were students from other schools, and their ESL teachers. The students I spoke with valued getting glimpses of other immigrant and refugee students' lives, and hearing their stories of relocation and continual adjustment to life in a new context. After presenting her essay in front of the audience Gar, a student from Vietnam, shared, "I was really scared to tell my story [of escape from Vietnam], but I also felt really important. It was so cool, and I think I did a good job!"

Oral narratives and photographic essays contain expressions of the self where student situates him or herself in discourse and imagery. These subjectivities can be powerful tools for teachers who attempt to bridge identities and new learning. Thus, although Ms. Jones and Mr. Wilson did tailor lessons and activities to engage students about their backgrounds and experiences, these types of approaches were infrequent.

Discussion and Conclusions

The research presented here pushes us to problematize if, when and how to elicit students' prior knowledge as a means of enhancing new learning, particularly among students with difficult pasts. Newcomer students often struggle with adjusting to a new school environment and social norms within that context (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). Feeling as though one belongs within that new environment is an important facet of language learning and motivation (Tse, 2001). Data and analyses presented in this article point to the importance of engaging SIFE students' prior knowledge as a means of fostering learning and belonging; they also caution teachers to do so with sensitivity and care (Noddings, 2005). SIFE students who have not developed academic literacy in their native languages will inevitably require extra support if they are to attain these skills in English. SIFE students do, however, enter school with a wealth of knowledge and experiences that contribute to their motivation to learn and succeed in school, and should be tapped into as they acquire academic skills in a new language. Teachers must be attentive to what students bring as a framework for learning, building on their experiences and background knowledge to introduce them to more public forms of literacy.

Findings of this study point to the importance of building a community within the classroom in which students feel safe and included, and in which students are encouraged to bridge new content with their histories-in-person (Holland & Lave, 2001). Fundamental

to this goal are connections between the classroom and local communities and peers. Broadly, curricula should be built around students' cultures and family values, while also emphasizing adaptation to life in a new context.

In underscoring the importance of seeking background knowledge of SIFE students, findings also indicate the importance of knowing when "not to go there," or when probing into a students' background may be problematic. Some students may be uneasy with interacting with teachers of the opposite sex, particularly around personal matters related to physical or emotional health, or relationships. Grouping students by language background, or gender could promote greater interaction between students.

Question-posing as a pedagogical method necessitates accepting of silence as a response, and acknowledging that silence does not necessarily entail passivity. SIFE students may engage in attentive silence (Cheung, 1993), processing new information in tandem with prior knowledge. Equally important is developing a pedagogy of listening (Shultz, 2003) to students whose stories in ways that are unexpected, but that illustrate students' processes of connection-making between their pasts, the present, and future. An overarching goal within this pedagogical framework is to reduce students' vulnerability to authority by fostering a supportive learning environment.

Ultimately, question-posing pedagogy also necessitates reflection on the part of teachers on their roles and responsibilities toward their students. In my research, Ms. Jones questioned whether or not to "go there" in her interactions with students. She expressed caution over coming across as nosy, or overbearing. She also unsure how she might respond to their stories, particularly those involving trauma. She saw herself as a teacher and was uninterested in assuming a caretaker role. Mrs. Edwards believed it was her responsibility to teach students about American culture through art, without drawing attention to students backgrounds. Mr. Wilson more directly connected students' prior knowledge with new learning, and viewed himself as a bridge between students backgrounds, and new experiences and opportunities in the U.S.

As Freire has argued, "we must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes and fears" (1970, p. 96). Advertisements, newspaper clippings (including images), magazines, web sites, and textbooks offer age-appropriate, content-based reading materials that expose students to contemporary and culturally relevant texts. SIFE students at the secondary level need access to literacy skills that provide them with resources and direction. Students may be particularly responsive to take-home assignments such as journals, artwork, photography or video-based projects. These kinds of assignments elicit rich background knowledge, and may be particularly effective with newcomer students who may be more hesitant to communicate ideas and experiences orally. Teachers must deploy pedagogies that recognize and validate the backgrounds of students while engaging real-life issues. What is more, though grouping students by native languages spoken may promote collaborative learning, teachers must also work to build greater interaction between ELL and native speaking students in mainstream classes so that students can learn from one another.

Limitations of this research are its small sample size, and its emphasis on teaching practices at just one school. My presence in the classrooms must also be considered as a

factor that may have influenced teachers' willingness to engage students' prior knowledge, or students' willingness to participate in class. Future research could address the questions raised here in more classrooms, and with a larger population of students. Research on one subset of this population could also yield important findings related to gender dynamics, racial and ethnic identity, language background (both teacher and student), or reasons for migration in relation to engagement of students' prior knowledge and experiences. Research could also probe more deeply into teacher beliefs around classroom dynamics, including working with English learners, as these do doubt influence the degree to which they attempt to tap into students' backgrounds. Finally, additional scholarship could focus more specifically on students' language proficiency in relation to their willingness to share personal stories. Longitudinal studies might reveal new insight into factors that contribute to when and to what extent newcomer adolescent and young adult language learners begin to feel linguistically and emotionally "ready" to share their histories.

Ultimately, teaching and learning across cultural and linguistic borders is an ethical enterprise that pushes us to ask challenging questions of ourselves and of our students. Teachers must recognize and give students the tools and space to discuss their experiences in meaningful and supportive ways.

About the Author

Dr. Liv Thorstensson Dávila's research examines the intersection of language learning and identity among immigrant and refugee students. Specific areas of interest include: multilingual students' language and literacy development, teacher education and classroom pedagogies that support access and equity, and global perspectives on immigration and language education. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Diaspora, Immigrant and Minority Education*, and *Journal of Southeast Asian Education and Advancement*.

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